

NEWS OF GREAT JOY

A Christmas Eve Sermon by Dean Scotty McLennan
Stanford Memorial Church
December 24, 2003

"I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people."ⁱⁱ That means for all of us: for those of us who've been rushing about desperately trying to get ready for Christmas, for those of us who are overwhelmed by the commercialism of this season, for those of us who can't find enough time for our families and friends, for those of us who experience this as one of the most stressful times of the year, for those of us who've lost jobs in a sour economy, for those of us who despair of peace and justice ever coming in a world filled with terrorism and oppression.

"I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people." Those words were originally heard only by a handful of Mid-Eastern shepherds some 2000 years ago. They were hated shepherds at that, because their sort didn't evoke the positive, pastoral image we have today of shepherds. In Israel at that time, shepherds were "scorned as shiftless, dishonest people who grazed their flock on others' lands."ⁱⁱⁱ What exactly was the "good news of great joy" of which the angel of God spoke? Well, it was news of the birth of the "Savior, the Messiah, the Lord."ⁱⁱⁱⁱ According to Luke's gospel, this earth-shattering announcement came first to the lowly and the outcast, not to the likes of us here at Stanford Memorial Church tonight.

Moreover, the Messiah announced was not the great crown prince whom most modern commentators say^{iv} was referenced in the eighth century B.C. poem in the Book of Isaiah, which was read earlier in this service. Worldly authority rested upon that prince's shoulders, and he

was named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. No, instead, Luke tells us that the Savior, the Messiah, the Lord was born to an unmarried couple staying with animals in a barn.^v Instead of being dressed in royal garments and laid in an ornate crib, the long-expected Messiah was wrapped in mere bands of cloth and placed in a feeding trough.^{vi} A third of a century later, after only 3 years of active ministry, this Messiah was ignominiously and painfully executed on a cross at the hands of the colonial rulers of Israel. He died being taunted by soldiers who'd put a crown of thorns on his head and a plaque on the top of his cross titling him "The King of the Jews."^{vii}

So, what is the "good news of great joy" for us here in Stanford Memorial Church on Christmas Eve, 2003? First of all, it's the momentous news that, through Jesus, God has entered into the daily life of this workaday world and redeemed it. God has saved the world and saved us. Exactly how God has redeemed and saved us has been debated by theologians for millennia. For me, though, it simply means that by God's grace all of our evil deeds are ultimately forgivable and we've been given a vision of ultimate meaning and purpose in life, defined as love. Specifically for us tonight, I suggest that we concentrate on three practices to exercise love ourselves and to demonstrate our gratitude for God's gift to the world. Those practices are simplicity, kindness, and prayer.

There's an old American Shaker hymn, "'Tis a Gift to Be Simple," which reminds us that simplicity brings freedom and delight. In the end, the hymn tells us, through simplicity we discover love; through simplicity we find ourselves in the place just right, and we come out right. Compare normal life here in the Silicon Valley. It's complex. It's sophisticated. It's

technologically-advanced. It's busy. Yet, it's possible, and critical, to pursue a life of simplicity here, amidst complexity, or on the far side of complexity.

For as Wordsworth pointed out, "The world is too much with us; late and soon,/ Getting and spending we lay waste our powers. Little we see in Nature that is ours;/ We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon." What better place than here, amidst near perfect weather most of the year and a gorgeous natural environment, to stop regularly and smell the flowers, to remember that other people are sacred ends in themselves and not means to our ends, and to keep our eyes on what really matters in each of our lives -- which inevitably is our important relationships, at work and at home, not our important material possessions. Good news of great joy appears to simple shepherds and loving parents as they gaze at a baby in a cold barn, not as they enjoy worldly riches in a sumptuous castle.

We sang earlier: "No more let sins and sorrows grow, nor thorns infest the ground." The King James translation of tonight's gospel lesson ends with the words, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men." Jesus comes into the world with a message of peace and goodwill. And so I encourage us tonight to commit to a regular practice of lovingkindness. A minister who helped found both the NAACP and the ACLU, the Rev. John Haynes Holmes,^{viii} wrote that Christmas "is as tho a spell were cast upon us, to save us...from our cruelties...and make us ministers of love...This is our task -- to seize and hold and perpetuate the Christmastide. To live a life, and not merely a single day or season, which is delivered of prejudice and pride, hostility and hate, and committed to understanding, compassion and goodwill!"^{ix}

Kindness is a practice which includes, in the words of Jesus, loving one's enemies, doing good

to those who hate you,^x turning the other cheek,^{xi} not judging lest we be judged,^{xii} feeding the hungry, and sheltering the homeless.^{xiii} These may seem like radical demands, but Jesus sums them up this way: "In everything do unto others as you would have them do unto you; for this is the law and the prophets."^{xiv} And so, let us use Christmas as a catalyst to an ongoing practice of lovingkindness -- a practice which should have not only elements of social service but also commitment to social change for the poor, the oppressed and the war-torn throughout the world.

Finally, along with simplicity and lovingkindness, I urge the practice of prayer. Tonight's service is filled with prayer, both spoken and sung. We began with prayer at the creche that we enjoy forever the love of Christ, and we prayed in "Joy to the World" that earth receive her King. We will share Prayers of the People, prayers at the Eucharist, a Prayer for Illumination, and a prayer of Benediction. Would that we could live as if our whole lives were a prayer.

By prayer, I don't only mean addressing God in praise or petition. Christian prayer has traditionally also had a listening dimension which is called meditation. That can be done not only sitting, but walking and acting with an open, attentive attitude. A third form has been contemplative prayer, centered on the divine presence within us -- perfected by mystics who report experiences of unity with God. A fourth dimension has been prayer in communion with other people, most obviously here in a worship service, but also in many smaller contexts where we join with others for support and companionship evoking the presence of God.^{xv} In any of its forms, though, prayer can help free us from our own ego, help us see the big picture rather than the petty and the transitory, and help us put everyday stress into context.

On this Christmas Eve, my prayer for each of us is that through the practice of simplicity we

slow down enough to see into the true heart of things, that through lovingkindness we open ourselves to true relationship in a transformed world, and that through prayer we transcend ourselves in true commitment to the life force itself, which for Christians goes by the name of Jesus the Savior, the Messiah, the Lord. Then, perhaps, we can truly hear the good news of great joy for all people that is announced tonight.

NOTES

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- i. Luke 2:10.
 - ii. New Interpreter's Bible (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), Vol. IX, p. 62.
 - iii. Luke 2:11.
 - iv. See New Interpreter's Bible, Vol. VI, p. 121.
 - v. Luke 2:5,7.
 - vi. Luke 2:12.
 - vii. Matthew 27:29,37.
 - viii. Spartacus Educational, "John Haynes Holmes," at <http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/USAholmesJH.htm>
 - ix. John Haynes Holmes, "To Live a Life -- Not Merely a Season," as quoted in Carl Seaburg (ed.), Celebrating Christmas: An Anthology, (Boston: Unitarian Universalist Ministers Association, 1983), p. 127.
 - x. Matthew 5: 44.
 - xi. Matthew 5:39.
 - xii. Matthew 7:1.
 - xiii. Matthew 25:35.
 - xiv. Matthew 7:12.
 - xv. "Prayer," The HarperCollins Dictionary of Religion (HarperSanFrancisco, 1995), pp. 852-853.